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CIA Counterfeiters Aid Afghan Rebels

Occasionally, the Central Intelligence Agency does something right. At least that's our verdict on its ultra-secret program to counterfeit millions of dollars in Afghan money.

The CIA has been churning out the counterfeit "afghanis"—as the denomination is known in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan—for several years. It began with the acquisition of an excellent set of plates that produces bills without blemish.

Why money? To provide the determined Afghan rebels and their friends in Afghan villages with the wherewithal to buy food, clothing and other basic necessities. It's the CIA's way of combating the Soviets' "depopulation strategy," which seeks to murder or drive out any Afghan who doesn't support the puppet regime.

The estimated population of Afghanistan when the Soviets invaded at the end of 1979 was 15 million. Fully one-third of that number no longer live in the country. One million have been killed in the fighting; most of the rest are in burgeoning refugee camps along the Afghan border in western Pakistan.

The Soviet strategy has been obvious to the Afghan mujaheddin. Villages the Soviets cannot control and those whose residents are suspected of aiding the rebels are brutalized. Crops are destroyed, suspected mujaheddin informants are tortured and executed. Sometimes, the Soviets resort to indiscriminately strafing such villages from helicopter gunships. And, too often, Soviet troops have marched in and massacred every man, woman and child in the village.

Meanwhile, areas the Soviets control are made

livable. Markets for food and other goods thrive there. Soviets even help cultivate the crops. It is in these areas that the CIA's counterfeit money has been put to good use.

"We're using the Russians' own supply system against them," gloated one CIA source. "We don't just provide this money to buy food for the rebels and 'friendlies' from these approved markets—we also encourage the mujaheddin to use the afghani money to corrupt the Soviet soldiers. Buy ammunition from them. Buy clothing and food from Soviet quartermasters. Get that money circulating."

The mujaheddin have been delighted with the program. As usual, though, a fair amount of graft goes on when the CIA's bogus bills arrive in Pakistan. Since not even the Afghans themselves can tell the difference, these bills are sold for their full value in Peshawar and Quetta, the two gateway cities used by the mujaheddin as headquarters for strikes inside nearby Afghanistan.

Another source familiar with the program said that CIA analysts realized that if the Soviets succeeded in making areas friendly to the mujaheddin inhospitable, the rebels would eventually lay down their arms.

That's why, he said, the Soviets have been "strafing fields at planting time, planting a few mines in other fields and leaving toys for children that blow up when they're picked up."

And so the caravans of cash continue to make the long journey through forbidding mountain passes into the villages, as much a weapon in this war as those loaded with arms and ammunition.